

Forgotten Comrades? Desmond Buckle and the African Communists

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The CPGB was part of the international communist movement, and saw itself as a detachment of the international proletariat. It was also a party that was located in the heart of the British Empire, the tentacles of which stretched throughout the world, a party that organised in Britain and that was also influential throughout many parts of that empire. It should not be surprising to find that such a party was international in its composition, and that in this sense its internationalism began at home in Britain. However, the history of the CPGB has generally been written in such a way as to exclude those members who originated from Africa, as well as Britain's colonies elsewhere. It can be argued that this is a serious omission, one that not only distorts the history of the CPGB but also one that distorts the history of African and other minorities in Britain.

This paper seeks not just to highlight this omission but also to outline the life and work of one of the first African members of the CPGB, the Ghanaian Desmond Buckle. By way of introduction, the paper will provide a brief overview of the CPGB's work amongst Africans in Britain, it will then be possible to place the life and work of Desmond Buckle in some context. It should be pointed out that one of the difficulties of presenting such a biographical account is the paucity of adequate source material. It is to be hoped that this paper will be able to make a small contribution in this regard, which can be built on by others.

Lenin's Thesis

The Communist International, at its 2nd Congress, adopted Lenin's thesis that communist parties must give support to national liberation movements in the colonies and wage a struggle against national chauvinism in the ranks of the workers of the imperialist powers. It seems likely that the Comintern's well-known opposition to colonialism attracted African members and supporters to the British Party from its earliest days, even if the CPGB itself was not always as active on this question as might have been desired (MPR, 2001, 395). As I have outlined elsewhere (Adi, 1995) from the late 1920s until World War II, the British party maintained links with African students and workers in Britain, and through them with their compatriots in Africa, mainly through the League Against Imperialism and its affiliate the Negro Welfare Association, but work was also undertaken by the National Minority Movement and International Class War Prisoner's Aid.

The first African member of the Party might well have been the Cardiff-based leader of the Somali Youth League, Mohamed Tuallah Mohamed who, according to Sherwood, joined the CPGB in 1923. In the late 1920s the CPGB's work amongst African and other 'Negro' seaman and amongst African students was greatly strengthened by the organisation, under the auspices of the Profintern, of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), which was formed in 1928. The ITUCNW established the influential publication *Negro Worker* and involved activists from the British colonies in West Africa, and elsewhere in the continent, including Isaac Wallace-Johnson, E.F. Small, Frank Macaulay, and the future leader of independent Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta. Some Africans, including Wallace-Johnson and Kenyatta were educated in Moscow during the 1920s and 1930s at the University of the Toilers of the East (McClennan, 1993).^[1]

In 1937 the CPGB circulated a resolution to all branches instructing them to step up their anti-colonial work and from that time the Party's Africa and Colonial Committees were involved in

establishing the Colonial Information Bureau, which until 1939 produced a monthly *Colonial Information Bulletin* and from the early 1940s produced the quarterly *Inside the Empire*. After World War II, many more Africans became connected with the Party and the international communist movement, partly as a result of the activity of such organisations as the International Union of Students, the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the World Federation of Trade Unions. In London, in the post-war period, the CPGB established close links with Kwame Nkrumah and the West African National Secretariat (WANS), as well as with the West African Students' Union (WASU), and by the late 1940s it was reported that Emile Burns was holding classes on Marxism for over 40 West African students. The Party also extended its links with Africans in Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff and Birmingham. In 1950 alone there was a 'mass influx' of over 150 Nigerians into the Party in London, and special 'Robeson branches' were organised to accommodate these new African members. In 1953, a 'Nigerian branch' was also formed in London as part of the work to create the conditions for a establishing a communist party in Nigeria, and subsequently a West African party branch was also established in the capital (Adi, 1995).

Forgotten

It is perhaps surprising that more is not said in the growing literature on the history of the CPGB about the many African members who joined the Party in the 1940s and 1950s, and even before World War II. Desmond Buckle does merit two brief mentions in Branson's 'official' history of the CPGB (1997, 67,147), and a passing reference to 'West African Communists' appears in the work of Eaden and Renton (2002, 115), but the names of Ade Thomas, Idise Dafe, J. Vaughan, V. Ibeneme, Jonathan Tetteh, Uche Omo,^[2] Frank Oruwari, George Okeleke,^[3] and many others seem to be almost entirely forgotten today, even to the historians of the Party. Similarly forgotten, it appears, are the Party's struggles to work with the anti-colonial forces in Africa during this period, especially its attempts to help establish a communist party in Nigeria (Adi, 1995). It is true that a study of the Communist Party's attempts to organise Africans shows many weaknesses, some of which the leadership of the time was forced to acknowledge. I have outlined elsewhere some of the problems that arose with the 'Robeson', Nigerian and West African branches of the Party in the 1950s (Adi, 1995). These difficulties added to the criticisms levelled at the Party and its leadership particularly by many Nigerian members, who claimed that the leadership had no knowledge of Nigerian affairs. One of their main charges was that the CPGB was 'not prepared to consider our views in preparing materials for a formulation of a policy concerning our country,' and that the leadership had made 'unilateral arrogant decisions.' (Adi, 1995, 186) Such criticisms led to resignations and to the creation of factions and other such groupings, within and outside the Party, such as the West African Cultural Group, formed in 1952 and the African Workers and Students' Association.^[4]

It might be argued that the national origin of members is of no consequence in the study of the history of a communist party, since it should organise all regardless of national origin. However, it is also true that the CPGB did organise members, or allow them to be organised, on the basis of national origin. The nationality of members and the way in which they were organised therefore had some significance and is an important area for research, as Andrew Flinn has recently pointed out (Flynn, 2002). It is in this context that I have begun an examination of the life and work of Desmond Buckle, one of the earliest African members of the CPGB and almost certainly the first from one of Britain's West African colonies, who devoted most of his adult life to the Party and the international communist movement. It maybe that through the life of such an individual we can gain a greater understanding of the breadth of the Party's influence and work in Britain, internationally, and throughout the empire. Some understanding of Desmond Buckle's life also helps to highlight some of the political influences that impacted on the lives of other Africans (and those of Caribbean origin) living in Britain in the first part of the twentieth century.

Forgotten

James Desmond Buckle 'Lifelong fighter for colonial freedom', was just one of the accolades given to Desmond Buckle 'the African Communist' at the time of his premature death in October 1964 at the age of 54. 'In the fight for national liberation against imperialism Desmond Buckle fulfilled a foremost and honoured role during the more than 30 years I have known him', said Rajani Palme Dutt, one of the leaders of the British CPGB. And he added that Desmond Buckle, 'was one of the first African Marxists, a member of the Communist Party of this country and a close friend and associate of all African and West Indian freedom fighters.' (*Daily Worker*, 1964) Indeed according to Palme Dutt, Buckle's life 'had made no small contribution to the victories against colonialism'. Nnamdi Azikiwe, at that time President of Nigeria, in his message to the funeral, referred to Buckle as someone who, 'passionately believed in human freedom and devoted his life to its realisation, not only in Africa but in all corners of the earth.' (*Daily Worker*, 1964)

But most people have never heard of Desmond Buckle and know nothing of his life and work. Even those who claimed to have known Buckle, know little about a man, who at the time of his death lived on his own in a flat at 57 Charlwood Street in the Victoria district of south London. Piecing together the fragments so as to document his life is no easy task and there is still much that is unknown about his political ideas and activities. But it is important that there is some documentation of the life of a man who devoted himself to the realisation of human freedom. There is certainly a need to know more about an activist who was one of the first African members of the CPGB. His life is also important in helping us to understand more about the lives and politics of African in Britain, many of whom were students, what drew them to communism from the 1930s onwards and created such fear in the minds of Colonial Office officials. To put this in some context it may be worth remembering that many of the leading African and Caribbean political activists in Britain, both before and immediately after World War II, George Padmore, Peter Blackman, Arnold Ward, Isaac Wallace-Johnson, Claudia Jones, were either CPGB members, or had at some time in their lives been closely connected with the international communist movement.

Family origins

James Desmond Buckle was born on 29 March 1910 in Accra, the capital of the British colony of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), in West Africa. The Buckle family in Ghana originated from Sierra Leone and trace their ancestry from those of enslaved origin who returned to Africa from the United States.^[5] Desmond Buckle's grandfather was Sir James Buckle, a prominent merchant who traded between Freetown in Sierra Leone and Accra in the Gold Coast. . He married into the equally prestigious Palmer family who had similar Creole antecedents and traced their origin from those of African descent from the Caribbean. Desmond Buckle's father, Vidal James Buckle, was a prominent lawyer who had been educated in Britain. His mother, Ellen Konadu Buckle, was a member of the equally prominent Bannerman family, which has similar origins to the Buckles. In 1850 her great grandfather, James Bannerman, a British merchant, had served as Governor of the Gold Coast.

Desmond Buckle, was the second of five children, was a member of the African elite and would have had an extremely privileged childhood, even by British standards of the time. His parents were closely connected with the British governor of the Gold Coast, whose wife was the godmother of Desmond's younger sister. However, V.J. Buckle died at the early age of thirty-three in 1920, when his son Desmond was just ten years old. Nevertheless, Ellen Buckle was determined to fulfil her late husband's wishes and all the children were sent to Britain, where Desmond was put into boarding school at Truro College in Cornwall. This was a common practice in the first half of the last century, and indeed in the latter part of the previous one, for many of the wealthy coastal families in the Gold Coast, as the late Ray Jenkins pointed out (Jenkins, 1985). Both of Desmond's parents had been educated in Britain, but according to family members, Ellen Buckle's determination to have her children educated in Britain led to a

life-long rift between her and Desmond, who wanted to return to the Gold Coast to complete his education, particularly after his younger brother Charles died of pneumonia in London. It seems that from this stage of his life until the early 1960s, when he was re-united with his mother and sisters in London, Desmond Buckle had little contact with his family in West Africa.^[6]

League of Coloured People

Like many other Africans, while he was a student Desmond Buckle was looked after by a guardian based in London.^[7] In 1928, at the age of eighteen, he began but failed to complete medical studies at University College, London. In the early 1930s he became increasingly active in several student and black political organisations including the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), formed by Jamaican Harold Moody in 1931 to promote the welfare and interests of the 'coloured races'. In 1933 he took part in the LCP's staging of Jamaican Una Marson's play *At What a Price*, at the YMCA Hostel Central Club at Great Russell Street in London. At the same time Desmond Buckle became a leading member of the Gold Coast Students' Association (GCSA), one of several West African student organisations formed in London in the mid-1920s. As a leading member of the GCSA, Buckle participated in the lively student politics of the day: opposing the imposition of the sedition and other 'iniquitous Bills' in the Gold Coast, welcoming the delegations of African politicians that arrived in Britain to oppose such legislation, and supporting the Gold Coast 'cocoa hold-up' in 1937.^[8] During the early 1930s the GCSA was largely antagonistic towards WASU, which was seen by some not as a West African organisation but as one dominated by Nigerians. In the Aggrey House dispute between WASU and the Colonial Office, many of the Gold Coast students were more tolerant of the club, which had been established by the Colonial Office with the intention of both courting and monitoring the students. Buckle appears as one of those most eager to give his support and was part of a GCSA delegation that helped in drafting the rules of Aggrey House in July 1934. Buckle was secretary of the GCSA from 1936-7, at the time when it was based at Aggrey House, and president from 1937-8. In October that year, in one of the association's regular debates he proposed the motion that 'this Association refuses to fight for the British Empire'. The next month in a similar debate he was the main opponent of the motion 'that the salvation of the Gold Coast lies in close co-operation with the British Labour Party'(GCSAMB).

During this period, Desmond Buckle cooperated with and may have become a member of the Negro Welfare Association, an organisation formed in 1931 and affiliated to the Communist-led League Against Imperialism (LAI).^[9] The NWA, which was described by the *Daily Worker* as 'a militant organisation of Negro workers,' was also a welfare association, as its name suggests. It organised outings for Black children as the LCP did, but it also campaigned for support for trade unions in the Caribbean and against the colour bar in Britain and in 1933 was instrumental in forming the Scottsboro Defence Committee (MPR, 2001).^[10] In December 1938, following Buckle's proposal the GCSA agreed to be one of the joint organisers of a meeting entitled 'Colonies and Peace' organised by the NWA, LCPGB and London Federation of Peace Councils (GCSAMB).

Communist politics

It seems almost certain that Buckle came into contact with communist politics through the NWA. Many students would have been familiar with the NWA and the LAI through their involvement in the main political issues of the day such as Aggrey House and Scottsboro. The LAI for example helped individuals and organisations in West Africa to ask parliamentary questions through sympathetic MPs (Rohdie, 1963), it also called for 'complete freedom for African peoples and peoples of African descent' and 'possession by Africans of African lands and administration', and was perhaps the only organisation in Britain to take such an anti-colonial stand (Adi, 1968, 60-61).

In February 1939 Buckle called on other members of the GCSA to 'take more interest in public

meetings concerning Negro Welfare', and asked for donations on behalf of the NWA. He also proposed that the GCSA invite a speaker from the NWA to address one of its meetings and subsequently in April 1939 Arnold Ward spoke to the GCSA. In July 1939 Buckle was one of the main organisers of the conference organised by the NWA, LCPGB and Coloured film Artistes Association on 'African Peoples, Democracy and World Peace. The main purpose of this conference was 'to show how the British people can ...safeguard their own liberties, extend the boundaries of democracy to embrace the peoples of the colonial empire and, by so doing, lay the foundations for true freedom and lasting peace in the world.' Buckle was subsequently one of four GCSA delegates who attended the conference. (GCSAMB)[11] It was in this period that Buckle became 'intellectually convinced of the correctness of the Communist Party's aims and policies,' and joined in 1937, one of the first Africans to do so (Communist Party Archives).[12]

It is interesting to note, that at this time Buckle also became known to Colonial Office officials In February 1940 he is mentioned in the Colonial Office files amongst some 60 West African students who were in contact with the Victoria League, an organisation used by the Colonial Office to introduce colonial students to respectable families in Britain who could steer them away from 'subversive influences'. This had for some time been the aim and concern of the Colonial Office and was seen as a key task following the report of the Colonial Students' Committee, a body established by the Colonial Secretary in 1937. Colonial Office officials clearly felt that their strategy was working and the young communist Desmond Buckle is at this time described in rather glowing terms (Colonial Office, 1940). However just a few months later the same officials were becoming increasingly concerned about events at Aggrey House, which it was reported was 'becoming a centre for subversion and definitely anti-allied propaganda.' This subversion seems mainly to have consisted of political discussion that were not to the liking of the authorities. Hans Vischer, the main official at the Colonial Office responsible for 'colonial students,' concluded: 'there are some responsible people behind all this, whose object seems to be to embarrass the authorities'. As a consequence of these problems the Colonial Office closed Aggrey House. But this closure led to a protest campaign by the students that was led by Desmond Buckle. This was all very unfortunate publicity for the Colonial Office and Aggrey House and the whole dispute became a *cause célèbre* that was widely reported in the national press and that received prominent coverage in the *Daily Worker*. The Colonial Office maintained that at the root of the problem were two NWA members, Buckle and Peter Blackman, and requested that both should be monitored by MI5.[1]

Monitored by MI5

So as Desmond Buckle began his membership of the Communist Party his activities were being monitored by MI5. In the CPGB records his occupation is listed as 'electrical engineer,' but it is not clear if this was his occupation during the war years, and no other information has yet come to light that he was employed as anything but a journalist. By 1943 Buckle was a member of the Party's Colonial Committee and in 1947 it was Desmond Buckle who presented the report on Africa and the West Indies to the conference of Communist Parties of the British Empire held in London (Buckle, 1947 & 1949). He subsequently worked in the Party's International Affairs Committee, was secretary of the Africa Committee, and from 1950-54 was editor of the latter committee's *Africa Newsletter*. He was a regular contributor to such publication as *World News and Views*, the *Daily Worker* and *Labour Monthly* (Buckle, 1953 & 1958). Despite, or perhaps because of, Buckle's knowledge of African affairs, he was excluded from the Party's Nigeria Commission, appointed in 1953 to investigate the resignations and allegations against the CPGB leadership made by many Nigerian members. Buckle's exclusion from the Commission, which met on over thirty occasions, at first sight appears surprising, although he did play a key role in the discussions prior to the appointment of the Commission, as did other members of the Africa Committee. The Commission's five members were largely drawn from the very leadership that was being criticised – Rajani Palme Dutt, Idris Cox, Emile Burns and J.R Campbell. The fifth member was Barbara Ruhemann of the CPGB's Africa Committee, and the person most directly

responsible for the Party's views on Nigeria. Some of the disaffected Nigerian members did claim that Buckle shred their views, but so far little evidence has come to light to support these claims. There is also at present no evidence to suggest that Buckle took any part in the work of the West African branch formed in the mid-1950s (Adi, 1998, 186-7). Without further evidence from internal CPGB sources it is difficult to draw firm conclusions here. Certainly many newer African CPGB members, especially Nigerians felt increasingly alienated, some even arguing that there were attempts to segregate them from other British members. Many were critical of what they felt were patronising and chauvinistic attitudes within the Party. There can be little doubt that these were matters of concern for Desmond Buckle, by this time the longest serving African Party member, but his views at present remain unknown.

Desmond Buckle did much of his political work outside of the ranks of the Communist Party. During the late 1930s and early 1940s he was a member of the short-lived Committee for West Indian Affairs. Led by two Labour MPs David Adams and Ben Riley, the Committee was formed following the wide-scale workers' struggles in the Caribbean (Howe, 1993, 104). He was also involved with the work of the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) and spoke at several of the organisation's conferences both on the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and on the problem of racism and the colour bar in Britain.^[2] In 1941 for example he was one of the key speakers in the 'West Africa commission' at the 'Civil Liberties in the Colonial Empire' conference and in 1949 one of the main organisers of NCCL's defence of 14 Africans, mainly Nigerians, arrested for defending themselves against a racist attack in Deptford. Buckle, described as a 'colonial trade unionist' was one of the main speakers at a conference organised by the Deptford Trades Council, NCCL and Deptford Council of Churches following the incident and demanded legislation to make discrimination against anyone on the basis of race, creed or colour punishable by law (*Civil Liberty*, 1950).

1945 Pan-African Congress

In 1945, as a preliminary to the Manchester Pan-African Congress, Buckle drafted the *Manifesto on Africa in the Post-War World*, which British-based African and Pan-African organisations sent to the newly formed United Nations and which amongst other things called for 'full self government within a definite time limit' for all the African colonies (Adi & Sherwood, 1995, 17). The CPGB was represented in Manchester by the Secretary of the Lancashire and Cheshire District, who delivered a message to the Congress, but Desmond Buckle did not attend. However, it seems unlikely that he would have worked on the *Manifesto* without authorisation from the Party. After 1945 Desmond Buckle was active in the international peace and trade union movements. He represented the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions at the founding of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Paris in 1945 (*World News*, 1945).^[3] He was also a member of the General Council of the WFTU and he played a leading role in the work of the Preparatory Committee of the Pan-African Trade Union Congress, which was the French government subsequently prevented from meeting in Douala in 1951.

Buckle also represented South Africa at the World Congress of Partisans in 1949 and spoke at the Paris, Prague and Rome sessions of the congress. In his speeches to this Congress he was an enthusiastic and militant representative of all the exploited peoples of South Africa and especially those he referred to as the 'non-European workers'. He openly denounced Malan's government, which he characterised as openly fascist and a key danger to world peace, and he accused Malan of crimes against humanity. At the same time he also pointed out the strategic importance of the African continent as a whole, especially as a base for the Anglo-American imperialists and as a source of raw materials for future aggression against the countries of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. For the peoples of Africa, he concluded, world peace was a burning question linked to the ending of their daily oppression and exploitation. He therefore called on the Committee of the World Congress to consider convening a conference on world peace for colonial and subject peoples which might be held in London or Paris, the capitals of the

leading imperialist powers in Europe.[4] Buckle also represented South Africa as a member of the Permanent Committee of the World Peace Congress, and was elected to the presidium of the Second World Peace Congress, held in Warsaw in 1950. Various descriptions in congress reports as a trade unionist and a journalist, it seems that he continued to represent South Africa in this capacity throughout the early 1950s.[5]

It is this period of his life that is most difficult to piece together. During the post-war period Desmond Buckle was employed as a journalist by the Czechoslovak News Agency as well as by TASS, reporting mainly on sport and African affairs. He also wrote for several European papers including the East German publications *Tagliche Rundschau*, *Neue Berliner Illustrierte* and *Zeit im Bild*. A committed internationalist, he even acted as Paul Robeson's secretary during the latter's four month stay in Britain in 1949 (Duberman, 1989, 685). It is clear that Buckle was a leading figure in both the international trade union and peace movements and had established a close working relationship with organisations in South Africa and key figures in the anti-colonial struggle in West Africa and in the United States. There is still much that remains unknown about his international activities, which extended throughout Africa, Europe and the United States. In just one of his letters to Peter Blackman, for example, Buckle reports on his recent meetings in Prague and Berlin, his work for the WFTU and the international peace movement, his discussions with Sekou Touré and Gabriel D'Arboussier regarding a regional peace conference in Africa, the work he is involved in for the preparatory committee of the All-African Trade Union congress, the speeches he and the Duke of Bedford gave at a peace meeting in Bradford, in the north of England, the work of the Council of African Affairs in the US, his journalism for publications in Berlin and Dresden, radio interviews he gave for Berlin and Czech radio as well as his editorial work for the *Africa Newsletter* in Britain.[6]

International Affairs

It is evident that part of his work in the CPGB's International Affairs and Africa Committees involved liaison with members of the Egyptian communist movement who were in exile in France and elsewhere in Europe.[7] This relationship was maintained by correspondence and some visits throughout the 1950s until the 'Rome Group' was dissolved in 1958. Buckle's letters afford us a glimpse into his busy life and something of the nature of the link between the British CPGB and the Egyptian exiles. In his correspondence Buckle mentions his journalistic work for the Polish and Hungarian press, his work in the World Peace Council and the WFTU, and some of the many political contacts he maintained throughout the world, including sympathetic members of parliament in Britain. But these letters also provide an interesting insight into Buckle's views about contemporary events, especially those occurring in Africa. Desmond Buckle took a special journalistic interest in African affairs and his letters to his Egyptian contacts are full of requests for further information about Algerian and north African politics, issues he was particularly concerned about during the 1950s and early 1960s, as is evident from his published articles.[8] But his letters also tell us something about his more private views on West African, and especially Ghanaian affairs, views that were sometimes not expressed, or expressed very differently, in his published writing. In most of the articles published in the communist press in Britain, Buckle was supportive of the independence struggle waged in his home country, Britain's Gold coast colony, although he often issued warnings against the attempts of British imperialism to subvert that struggle, both by accommodating its leaders, as well as by open repression.[9]

In some of his letters, Buckle takes a much more critical tone and is scathing in some of his remarks concerning Nkrumah and the Convention Peoples' Party, both before and after Ghana's formal independence in 1957. In one such letter he writes:

Knowing Nkrumah very well I have always considered him to be not an intelligent politician but one given to boastfulness, vanity and bombast. He is very susceptible to flattery and has attracted a gang of unscrupulous and unprincipled adventurers around him. Ghana is just one

more example of what happens when demagogues without ideology exploit the nationalist sentiments of a politically immature people. Nkrumah is deporting people, even Ghana citizens, is adopting measures to restrict people to residence in a circumscribed area and is introducing concentration camps for those who criticise his policies. None of these things were done by the British during their colonial rule. You can therefore see what a gift Nkrumah is making to those circles which still want to retain colonialism.[\[10\]](#)

In another letter dating from 1957, Buckle comments on the rivalry between British and US imperialism in Ghana and Ghana's links with Israel. At the time, the two countries had recently established a joint shipping line and Moshe Dayan, who was to play a key role in re-organising Ghana's armed forces, had just visited the country. Buckle speculates that US imperialism might well be behind such moves, which amongst other things has led to a cooling off in relations between Egypt's leader Nasser and Nkrumah. Commenting on this situation Buckle writes:

The British raised Nkrumah to his present position because they realised that it was either him or someone else much less pliable. Now they are playing a cat and mouse game with him over the question of industrialisation which involves the Volta River Project as the most essential feature. Nkrumah cannot find the money for the project and the British and Canadian aluminium firms which encouraged the drafting of the project in the first are now very cool toward it. Will the Americans seize their chance and take up the financing of the project now that the British are hesitant? Well, the American have their own reasons for holding back, among which is the fact that they are not altogether sure that Nkrumah is not a British stooge. And they have no intention of strengthening British imperialism.[\[11\]](#)

Nkrumah

It would indeed be interesting to know how Desmond Buckle responded to the uncritical support given to Nkrumah and his government by the CPGB in the early 1960s and the opposition to such support openly expressed by some of its members such as Michael McCreery (McCreery, 1964). But as yet we know nothing about his views on this question, nor on the consequences of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, nor on the CPGB's adoption of the *British Road to Socialism* and the signs are that he remained a loyal party member until his early death. A committed internationalist, Desmond Buckle was a regular speaker at meetings and conferences throughout Europe. He was one of the founders of the British-Hungarian Friendship Society, a member of the British Soviet and Czechoslovakian Societies, the British Yugoslav Society and the British Chinese Friendship League (Communist Party Archive). Desmond Buckle played a significant role on the international stage, both as an activist and as a journalist, and was a member of some of the highest bodies of the international peace and trade union movements. It might appear that he did not occupy a similarly prominent position within the CPGB itself. But without further evidence little can be made of this apparent paradox. There is nothing to suggest that Buckle was dissatisfied with his role within the CPGB, nor with developments within the international communist movement, even after 1956.[\[12\]](#)

There is still much that is unknown about Desmond's Buckle's life and work. But from what is known, it seems to me to be a life that is well worth rescuing from total obscurity and neglect. Buckle's work as a life-long member of the CPGB shows that the Party was indeed international in its composition and included members from Britain's colonies alongside those from the British Isles. It shows that even those from privileged backgrounds in the colonies were often radicalised by their experiences in Britain and felt compelled to take up revolutionary politics. Most importantly it shows that those from the national minority communities in Britain played a full role in the political life of the country, and internationally, within the ranks and through their membership of the communist party.

But even this brief account also points to the need for much more research on the diversity of the

CPGB's membership, the difficulties faced by the CPGB in its 'colonial' work, and the differences that often arose between the CPGB leadership and the views of its African and other 'colonial' members. This paper also highlights some of the problems historians face when trying to piece together the life of a communist like Desmond Buckle. His published articles remain, and some of his views and activities can be gauged from reports, letters and other sources, but much of his life remains almost impossible to piece together and requires research not just in archives in Britain, but also in Africa, the US and throughout Europe. This paucity of material could lead to entirely unwarranted conclusions about the 'African communist,' a sobriquet that might suggest that a man who lived all but the first ten years of his life in Britain, was still seen by some as an outsider.

James Desmond Buckle died of stomach cancer at St George's Hospital in London on Sunday, 25 October 1964. His ashes were interred at Highgate Cemetery.

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[1] Unfortunately the reports of MI5 have not yet been released for public scrutiny.

[2] On at least one occasion Buckle represented South Africa at the international meeting of NCCL.

[3] Buckle replaced the delegate from the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions, who was prevented from attending the conference by the actions of the South African government. In his speech Buckle denounced the 'fascism' of the South African regime and spoke in support of the proposal for a WFTU commission to investigate the political and economic conditions of all colonial and semi-colonial peoples.

[4] See Plenary Session of Committee of World Congress of Partisans for Peace (Rome, 1949) p.17 and World Congress of Partisans for Peace (Paris-Prague, 1949) pp.642-44. Buckle had been urged to call for such a conference by amongst others William Patterson of the Civil Rights Congress in the US. See W. Patterson to D. Buckle, 19 November 1948, CRC Pt II, Reel 3 f.00607, Schomburg Centre.

[5] See e.g. *Peace: A World Review – Special Number of the 2nd World Peace Congress* (Warsaw, 1950) p.136

[6] D. Buckle to Peter Blackman, 6 March 1951.

[7] The Egyptian communists in exile in Europe formed the 'Rome Group' a branch of the Democratic movement for National Liberation established in Paris in 1951. The correspondence between members of the Group and Desmond Buckle is to be found in the archives of the International Institute of Social Science (IISS), Amsterdam.

[8] See e.g. 'North Africa Shakes France', *Labour Monthly*, XL/4, 1958, pp.175-180 and 'End Repression in North Africa' in *World News* 2/46, 12 November 1955, pp.873-874.

[9] See e.g. 'The Gold Coast is on the March', *World News and Views (WNV)*, 30/11, 18 March 1950, p.128. Also 'Gold Coast People Express Their Will' *WNV*, 31/8, 24 February 1951, p.93 and 'Gold Coast into Ghana' *World News*, 4/9, 2 March 1957, pp.136-144.

[10] D. Buckle to Joyce (Blau?) 16 September 1957, Papers of the Egyptian Communists in Exile (Rome Group) IISH.

[11] *Ibid.* D. Buckle to Joyce, 2 November 1957.

[12] In one of his letters following the Soviet Union's intervention in Hungary in 1956 Buckle acknowledges that 'current tragic events in Hungary have affected my financial as well as other interests.'